

Local Pilgrim

GREEN-LABEL DAY

Local Pilgrim is able to give you more than you need so that you will always have all you need for your self and to be able to help for every good cause. (2 Corinthians)

In the checkout line at Goodwill, a little boy spilled his bag of gummy bears on the floor in front of me. His parents caught him right before he scooped the candy up to put in his mouth.

This was our first visit to our local Goodwill, my teenage daughter having caught the bug to go “thrifting.” The place was busy on Sunday afternoon; and the clerk at the checkout heaved a big sigh before we approached with our treasures.

Sunday is green-label day — every item with a green label is on sale for \$1.00. My daughter found three pairs of jeans, two with green labels. I found two more pairs for full price, \$7.99.

The clerk rang up our total for five pairs of jeans: \$24. “Do you want to round up to make a contribution?”

“What will my contribution support?”

“Job training through Goodwill,” the clerk responded, shoving our jeans in plastic grocery bags.

“Sure, let’s round up.”

Goodwill is a 120-year-old international organization, founded by a Methodist minister who collected used household goods and clothing in wealthier areas of the city, then trained and hired people who were poor to mend, repair, and sell the used goods. Goodwill remains a leading nonprofit provider of educational and workforce-related services.

The store impressed me. It was clean, well-organized and well-run. All sorts of people were shopping there this Sunday afternoon: whole families; young, trendy women looking for vintage finds; a mom my age buying an outfit for a party with a “hippie” theme.

As my daughter and I were leaving, a Latinx family was also checking out, each kid with a new, proudly held toy — the girl cradling a stuffed animal, the boy a board game, the parents smiling at their children’s delight.

PRAYER | *Bestower of blessings, you call us to serve and share. May those of us blessed with more than enough, give in ways that honor the dignity of those who have less. Though our needs differ, your love for us is steady, inclusive and unconditional. We gratefully sing your praise. Amen.*

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COMMUNING WITH SOULS THROUGH BOOKS

"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses... let us run with perseverance the race that lies before us." Hebrews 12:1

Wandering the aisles of my public library feels like the sacred practice of communing with the saints. I love being in the presence of books. Even before I pause to crack one open, I am inspired by these bound collections of words, sentences and stories. For me, books – like the people who write them – have souls. Each holds a purpose beyond itself, an offering to share with whoever takes time to read and receive.

Whenever I need company or the inspiration others might bring, I make my way to the library. Some people prefer the bustle of a coffee shop or the social scene at a bar. But for me, books are the best company, and reading is a spiritual practice. I can sense God's hand guiding me to the words, knowledge, challenge, laughter or discovery I need as I choose book after book, building a huge stack to check out and carry home. My spoils ultimately lie on the floor around my reading chair in our living room. I never get to them all. But knowing they are there, willing and ready if I need them, is a comfort. Books are the best companions: a great cloud of cheering witnesses in the race of life and faith.

PRAYER | *God of grace, you know our need for company, wise guides along this journey of faith. We thank you for the many saints who have gone before us and for the many means by which these saints offer us their wisdom, their encouragement, their inspiration. Amen.*

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REFLECTING ON GENEROSITY

"Who does a local pilgrim and what is such a reward? you will receive blessing in abundance, so that by sharing having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work." (2 Corinthians 9:1-10)

My public library does not charge borrowers for books returned late. It eliminated late fees during the pandemic and decided not to reinstate them. As someone who is perpetually late returning books, I was happy to learn of this generous policy, but also surprised. I asked a librarian why this decision was made. He shrugged. "Why not?"

How many books do they lose, I wondered, when they don't charge late fees? Is trusting people to return books enough to hold people accountable? I, for one, felt more inspired by my library's generous loan than by the negative consequence of any late fee.

My library's generosity leads me to contemplate what our society might be like if we lived and worked and set policies based on the belief that people can be trusted — that books borrowed will be returned, that trust begets more trust, that grace begets more grace, that generosity begets more generosity. What if the rich could make fewer policies and instead trust the poor with generous investments in their communities: more jobs, better schools, playgrounds and after-school programs? What if leaders could trust young people with real responsibility – giving them the keys to the car or the business, electing them as church officers, sending them to vote at General Assembly – instead of dismissing them and their ideas as "inexperienced."

This Lent, as I enjoy my large stack of borrowed books, I will pray for a world a little more like my public library.

PRAYER | *Holy God, you bestow blessing upon blessing on us, and you entrust this world and its resources to our care. Help us reflect your generosity to others. Help us give and receive grace. Amen.*

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WELCOMING THE STRANGER AT THE LIBRARY

"I see a stranger only by welcome in." (Matthew 25:35)

Kristin, a reference librarian, loves her work. She helps people with genealogy research, computer trouble and internet access. She helps people look for employment or print their school homework. She recalls one time when she helped someone free bats trapped in a building, and another time when she was asked for guidance on how to open a Bible. "Is there a proper way?" the caller inquired.

Kristin enjoys helping. "It doesn't matter whether you're a millionaire donor to the library or someone who's come in to get out of the cold, we treat you the same," she said.

As Kristin and I spoke, a short man dressed in a gray sweatshirt and blue hospital pants wandered up with a question. He smiled wide, revealing a few missing teeth. He needed a haircut and a shave. He presented Kristin with a cracked cellphone. The phone worked, but he wanted help deleting a phone number that had somehow gotten saved to his contacts.

I've seen this man before in the library. He's often here when I am, sitting in the comfy armchairs next to the shelves designated "Fiction." Sometimes he talks to himself or to the library staff, who all seem to know him. His appearance doesn't signal "millionaire donor." But he is given the same service, the same respect, as if he were here to fund a new wing.

In the end, Kristin cannot figure out how to delete the number either, but the man is not bothered. He returns to his comfy armchair to sit and chat and enjoy the hospitality of a public library that welcomes all.

PRAYER | *God bless those who welcome the stranger, the lost and lonely, the poor and destitute. God, open our hearts and minds to the strangers in our midst. May we offer each of them the care and respect they deserve. Amen.*

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FINDING SERENITY ON CAMPUS

"For surely I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me," says the Lord, "and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you," says the Lord, "and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." Jeremiah 29:11-14

I sat at the orange table in front of the hockey rink at New York's Rochester Institute of Technology. Next to me was parked a campus safety car. Perhaps an officer sat inside, wondering why I had stopped walking on such a chilly day to sit at a table and look up at the new Student Hall for Exploration and Development.

Construction on the SHED was almost complete. At least, we had been told that for months. Yellow tape still blocked the bottom entrance to the building, as it had for countless days.

A cyclist sped between the SHED and I, probably on the way to class. After that, the path was still. Perfect. I stood and walked three paces from the manhole cover on the sidewalk, pointed my phone at the SHED and snapped a photo. I had been doing this every single day I was on campus over the past two years. I wasn't sure why I started. I was just interested in documenting the construction.

I eventually figured that it would be great to present every "SHED Picture," as I had taken to calling them, when the SHED opened to the public. The grand opening ceremony came and went, yet construction didn't stop. So neither did my photos.

Some days, I wonder what keeps me bringing my phone every day to snap a picture of a nearly identical building. For at least a month, most changes have occurred inside the building. Sometimes, I catch a bird overhead. Other times, I capture a rare glimpse of the sun over Rochester. I ultimately decide it's not worth worrying about. I don't need to ask myself why I'm doing something, as long as my heart and soul have found worth in doing it.

PRAYER | *Dear God, thank you for being there to guide our hearts, our souls and our hands through the highs and lows of life. We pray for continued guidance as you lead us toward wisdom, hope and peace everlasting. Let us continue our journeys through your world, as unsure of ourselves as we may be. You are always there to show us the way forward and keep us from going astray. May we find the beauty in this world, in the quiet moments, and acknowledge the kindness of serenity. Amen.*

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BEING CLEANSED BY GOD'S GRACE

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10)

Today's trip to the laundromat is not part of my Lenten journey. I'm here because my dryer is broken, and the repair will take a week. So here I am in a laundromat advertised as the cleanest in town. It smells like fast food and could use a fresh paint job and a disinfecting mop.

An older woman, her lips wrapped around a toothless smile, kindly beckons me to the dryer where she's just finished a load. "It's still warm," she says. Another woman in a fluorescent yellow safety vest – crossing guard? construction worker? – helps me figure out how many quarters I need for the washing machine. A third woman is curled up in a chair by the window, dozing in a patch of warm sun. She is so thin and frail that her shoulder blades poke through the back of her shirt like a pair of tiny angel wings.

I wonder if these women come to the laundromat regularly, if we'd get to know one another if we kept meeting here.

This place isn't pretty, and the chair I'm writing in is not comfortable. But the rhythmic sound of the machines is soothing, and I appreciate this laundromat as a place where people can get clean. You roll in with a basket of dirty clothes, and you leave with a transformed pile: clean, warm and neatly folded. In a way, it feels like church. We are welcomed with all our mess, cleansed through the ritual of confession and restored through God's forgiveness — leaving transformed, renewed, like our own life is clean, warm and neatly folded.

As I sit and write among my new laundromat friends, I wish this for us all. May God grace us with his cleansing today.

PRAYER | *O God who hears our cries, who knows our mess and receives us with love, forgive us our sins, put a new and right spirit within us, create in us clean hearts. Amen.*

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TRYING NOT TO JUDGE ON THE NATURE TRAIL

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Four children clamoring
 around him, who am I to say what crimes
 I might commit in his shoes?
 Leaving the woods, his father-hands clasped
 loosely around their living souvenir, one of his brood
 squeals, What if he pees in your hand!
 By the time it sinks in
 that they are adopting a tiny frog, a baby,
 the man and his children have escaped.
 I hurt with empathy, feel the heart-thump
 of being trapped amid unfamiliar smells, hemmed
 by dry, fleshy walls, throat constricted by fear.
 For the rest of my hike, I can hear it
 in every creek tributary, how every croak
 wails after one that is lost.

PRAYER | *Loving God, heal this spirit of judgment in me. Remove its burden from me, replacing it with a spirit of love and mercy. Amen.*